

Family and Children in the Digital Age: Creating a safe online environment for children

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Every child seeks to have a role-model. For me that was the anime character [Captain Future](#). To the iconic [soundtrack](#) of the German version this mixture of scientist and interstellar secret agent saved entire civilizations from terrible villains as well as natural and man-made disasters as he travelled across time and physical dimensions. Tragically, the captain's parents were murdered by the father of his arch enemy. Hence, he was raised by a triad consisting of the robot Greg (possessing an [artificially intelligent brain](#)), the android [Otho](#) and the 'living brain' Prof. Simon Wright. By the time I realized that my childhood hero was permanently surrounded, supported and even raised by machines who were his 'family' I was more than thirty years old. This is a relevant insight, since it shows on the one hand that children accept the world as it is. On the other, we hardly reconsider what became a dear and important part of our childhood. Children do not question the influence of technology on their lives. They do not take 'traditional' human interaction for granted. Certainly, this is a great asset since it is possible for them to become a '[digital native](#)'. Nevertheless, this potentially bears great danger in an age where more personal data is permanently created, collected, analysed and stored than ever before.

Digital participation and digital literacy

While security, confidentiality and privacy play an important part when growing up, exploring and engaging with the (digital) world is equally significant for the development of [children and minors](#). Therefore, it is necessary for parents to have an idea about when they give their children access to connected devices, to which degree they allow connectivity and in which forms. For example, it might be easier to control the use of a Wi-Fi dependent tablet than the use of a smartphone with cellular connectivity. Luckily, many corporations have started to address this issue and upgraded parental control tools [recently](#).

Consent as a particular problem for children

Most of the digital services we use require individual consent. The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) leaves it to member states to decide at which age minors are [able to consent](#). Therefore, the necessary age to be able to use digital services differs across the EU ranging from [13-16 years](#). This can be especially confusing because also in countries with the same language this age differs. For example, in Austria the required age is 14 whereas in Germany a minor has to be 16. It is necessary for parents to keep this in mind when allowing children to setup 'free' e-mail addresses, social media accounts or using messaging apps such as WhatsApp. Particularly the latter can be very problematic since it has become very popular to use messaging apps in schools. Not only in [Switzerland](#) this has sparked considerable public debate and it is generally advisable to use messaging apps that can be used as anonymously as possible, particularly without having to register with a phone number (e.g. [Signal](#), [Threema](#), [Wire](#)). Some countries such as [France](#) have taken more drastic measures by banning smartphones from classrooms. At least one study supports this policy reduces [distraction of school children](#).

Trial and error in the digital age

Perhaps the most worrying aspect about digitisation and children is the loss of margin for trial and error. Every piece of personal data is being stored for a long time and can be (re-)used in the future for profiling, tracking, and the prediction of behavior. The idea that a picture a mother posted on Facebook when someone was 6 months old later influences an automated profiling decision whether a job applicant is suitable for the [post](#) is certainly chilling. While this may be an extreme example, legislators across Europe and the world have started to respond to this possibility. Not only the EU raises data protection standards with regulations such as GDPR. The Council of Europe has a comprehensive set of resources addressing the situation of children in the [digital age](#) including '[Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment](#)'. Furthermore, in the United States currently a vivid debate takes place on a potential update to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act ([COPPA](#)) to facilitate the erasure of data. Since January 2015 the state of California already has a statute (Privacy Rights for California Minors in the Digital World, [SB 568](#)) that prohibits the profiling of children for certain sensitive purposes and entitles minors to [extended rights](#) to erase

personal data. This is particularly remarkable since typically the concept of a 'right to be forgotten' is not very popular in the USA.

Conclusion

Whether it is better or worse to be a child in the digital age is probably impossible to answer. For sure, it is different. Hence, there is a genuine need to revisit existing concepts such as the human right to private and family life, the right to information, freedom of expression and other rights that define how the space between the individual and society is divided. To contribute to this effort, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy in April 2019 started a [consultation](#) on privacy and children. Additionally, legislative frameworks such as GDPR or resources of the Council of Europe offer guidance for public institutions that translate into safeguards and remedies for citizens if applied properly and effectively. However, growing up also requires physical and digital space allowing for risk and failure. This is crucial to form an independent personality and critical thinking. Digitisation with its massive collection and storage of personal data has the tendency to limit that space. Hence, while more regulation and institutional action is welcome a wise cultural approach based on the acceptance of constant change and digital literacy is paramount.

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